

Scholars and Literati at the University of Siena (1246–1800)

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This note is a summary description of the set of scholars and literati who taught at the University of Siena from its inception in 1246 to 1800.

1 SOURCES

To our knowledge, historians have not produced any comprehensive register of scholars active in Siena before 1800. Most works do not aim to collect information on the teachers' biographies, but to a general reconstruction of the history of the *Studium*. Thus, we had to rely on different types of sources to gather the necessary data. Some of the included scholars were taken from the database "Maestri e scolari a Siena e Perugia" by Frova, Catoni, and Renzi (2001). As in Manfredini and Vitale (2024), this database served only as a starting point. In fact, it is no longer updated and much of the contained information is obsolete. Moriani (1873), despite its age, provides the names of prominent academics along with brief biographical notes. Several historical works focus on the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but few delve into the university's more recent past. We tried to balance the underrepresented 17th and 18th centuries by using Ascheri et al. (1991), but the coverage for those centuries remains limited. Some of the canonists active before 1500 were drawn from Pennington (2024). All other observations derive from the work conducted on other universities and concern scholars who held multiple affiliations.

2 THE UNIVERSITY

Siena's legal and medical schools date back to the early 13th century. They were initially supported by the municipality to rival the prestige of the nearby University of Bologna. The University of Siena was officially founded on December 26, 1246, through a papal bull issued by Pope Innocent IV. After a student uprising related to the execution of a Spanish student in 1320, some law students from the University of Bologna relocated to Siena. Seeing an opportunity, the municipality moved quickly to strengthen the university as a cultural and political center. However, the Black Death in 1348 caused a significant decline, nearly leading to its closure. In 1357, Emperor Charles IV officially recognized the university and granted it imperial privileges. This was a moment of strength that allowed it to compete with major European universities. The establishment of the faculty of theology in 1408 broadened its academic offerings but also led to tension, as Siena sought to balance local control with papal and imperial influences. In 1555, a shift of control from the municipality to the Medici administration inaugurated a period of centralized governance. This arrangement helped maintain stability until the university faced new pressures with Enlightenment reforms in the 18th century, challenging its traditional structures.

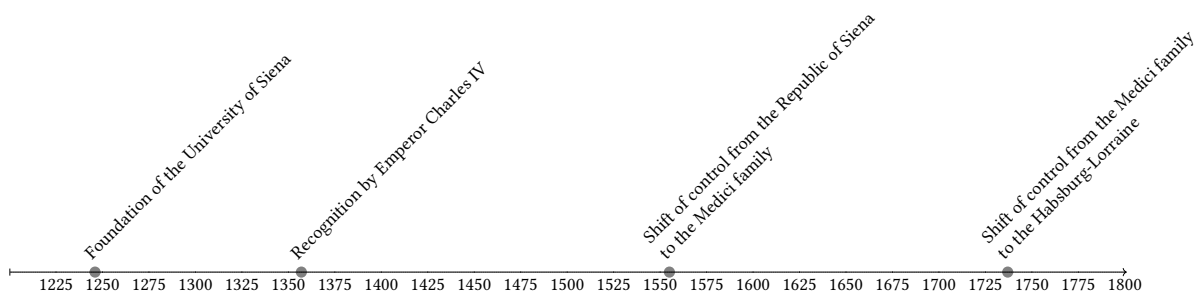


Figure 1: Timeline of the University of Siena

| Period | no. obs | birth date | known place | mean age at appoint. | mean age at death | med. dist. birth-univ. | with Wiki. | with VIAF |
|-----------|---------|------------|-------------|----------------------|-------------------|------------------------|------------|-----------|
| 1200–1347 | 116 | 11.2% | 44.8% | 35.2 | 67.5 | 117 | 14.7% | 17.2% |
| 1348–1449 | 109 | 29.4% | 51.4% | 37.4 | 66.6 | 102 | 23.9% | 30.3% |
| 1450–1526 | 64 | 25% | 50% | 33.4 | 70.9 | 47 | 18.8% | 26.6% |
| 1527–1617 | 64 | 39.1% | 76.6% | 29 | 64 | 0 | 18.8% | 46.9% |
| 1618–1685 | 22 | 31.8% | 59.1% | 34.6 | 65.3 | 0 | 27.3% | 45.5% |
| 1686–1733 | 15 | 46.7% | 73.3% | 40 | 68 | 0 | 26.7% | 60% |
| 1734–1800 | 28 | 57.1% | 50% | 43.3 | 73.5 | 117 | 32.1% | 75% |
| 1200–1800 | 418 | 27.8% | 54.3% | 35.5 | 67.7 | 56 | 20.6% | 33.5% |

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

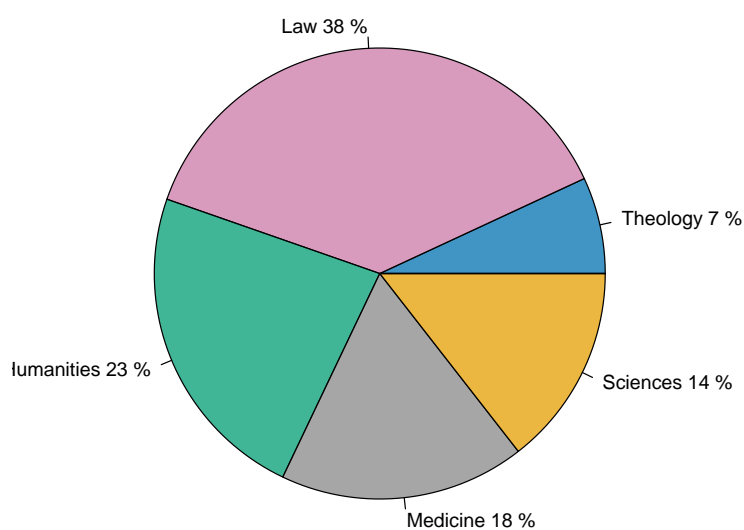


Figure 2: Broad fields at the University of Siena (published scholars only)

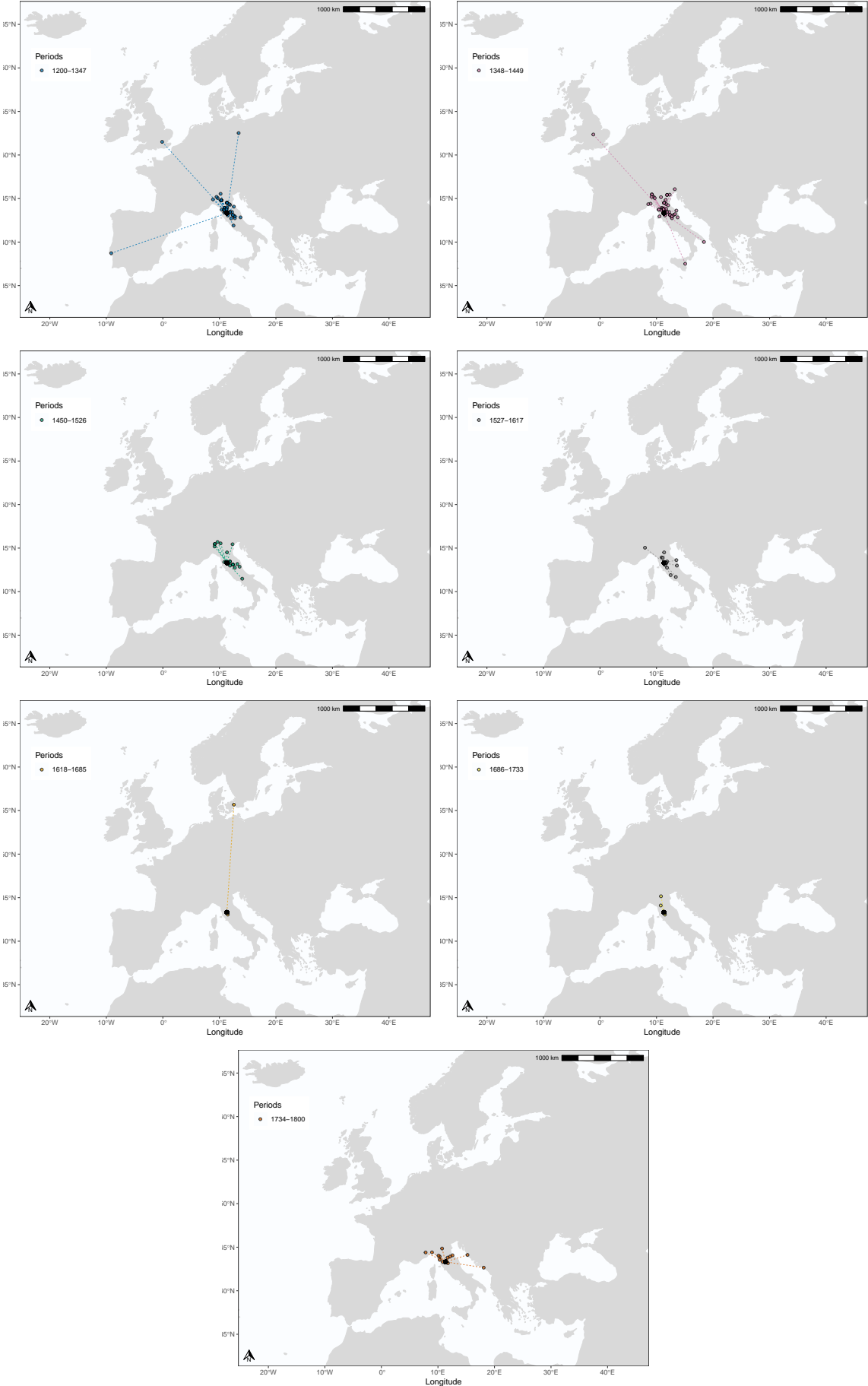


Figure 3: Places of birth of the scholars and literati at the University of Siena

3 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics. We have information on 418 scholars. Overall, the birth place is known for 54.3% of the scholars. The university had mostly a local nature, which is reflected in the median distance between the *Studium* and the scholars' birthplaces. However, the period 1734-1800 was characterized by a surge in the degree of internationalization. Most academics do not have a Wikipedia page (in any language). The share of scholars with a VIAF link is higher compared to other universities in Tuscany and Umbria (Manfredini and Vitale 2024; Gualandris and Vitale 2023). This figure is probably biased upward due to missing observations for the most recent centuries.

4 FIELDS

Figure 2 portrays the balance between the different fields. Most scholars were active in the field of law. The presence of renowned legal scholars in the Middle Ages such as Baldus de Ubaldis made Siena an important center for legal studies. This prestige induced several minor scholars to divert their intellectual effort to this field. Very important, albeit with lower share, was the field of theology. According to our records, three scholars who taught theology in Siena consequently became popes.

5 PLACES OF BIRTH

Figure 3 displays the documented birthplaces for the scholars who were active at the University of Siena by period. Although the university was located in a small town, until the first half of the 15th century it attracted some important academics coming from all over the Italian Peninsula. Scholars coming from outside the Peninsula were an exception. In the 16th century, a new criterion for recruiting professors was introduced to favor local teachers. This decision aimed to ensure the regularity and stability of the courses and to make the university more attractive to new faculty members. After 1450, the degree of internationalization of the *Studium* gradually declined, with an increase in the second half of the 17th century.

6 HUMAN CAPITAL OF SCHOLARS AND LITERATI

For each person in the database, we compute a heuristic human capital index, identified by combining information from VIAF and Wikipedia, using principal component analysis. We also compute the notability of the university at each date by averaging the human capital of the best five scholars active in Siena 25 years before that date. The details are given in Curtis and De la Croix (2023). Figure 4 shows the names of all the scholars with a positive human capital index. The orange line displays the notability of the university, based on how well published its top scholars were.

The pre-1500 period appears to be the period of glory of the university. Its fame was mostly due to its scholars in law, the humanities and theology. All the top scholars were active before the 17th century. Thereafter, the average quality of the university seems to have declined. However, the scarcity of observations prevents us from drawing clear-cut conclusions for this period. The trend followed by scholars in the upper-tail of the human capital distribution resembles that of the University of Perugia (Manfredini and Vitale 2024).

7 TOP 5 PROFESSORS

Pedro Juliano Rebello (Lisboa 1210 – Viterbo 1227), also known as Pope John XXI, followed in his father's footsteps and became a physician after studying at the University of Paris. After completing his studies, he was called to Siena, where he was appointed professor of medicine, teaching from 1245 to 1250 before embarking on his ecclesiastical career. He later became Archbishop of Braga and Cardinal-Bishop of Tusculum before being elected pope in 1276. His papacy was brief: he died in 1277 due to a ceiling collapse in the papal palace in Viterbo. John XXI remains the only Portuguese pope in history.

Francesco della Rovere (Celle Ligure 1414 – Roma 1484), known as Pope Sixtus IV, was a member of the Franciscan order and distinguished himself for his extensive theological scholarship, which led him to teach at numerous academic centers in Italy (De la Croix and Vitale 2021a, 2021b; Vitale 2022; Zanardello 2022; Vitale 2024). In Siena, he held a chair in theology from 1444 to 1450.

Francesco Filelfo (Tolentino 1398 – Firenze 1481) was a renowned humanist and translator of classical Greek texts, including works by Homer, Aristotle, Plutarch, Xenophon, and Lysias. He studied in Florence and Padua, becoming an important figure of the Renaissance. He had a significant influence as a teacher and scholar in cities such as Milan, Bologna, and Siena, where he taught from 1434 to 1439. His life was tumultuous due to conflicts with the Medici family, who attempted to eliminate him on several occasions. He died at the age of 83 after three marriages and 24 children, having led a life worthy of a novel. In 1911 Symonds under the entry “Francesco Filelfo” in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, wrote about him: “He was a man of vast physical energy, of inexhaustible mental activity, of quick passions and violent appetites; vain, restless, greedy of gold and pleasure and fame; unable to stay quiet in one place, and perpetually engaged in quarrels with his compeers.”

Baldus de Ubaldis (Perugia 1327 – Pavia 1400) was a prominent Italian jurist and professor, among the most important of the late Middle Ages. Born in Perugia, he studied law under the renowned Bartolus de Saxoferrato, becoming one of his principal successors. Baldus was distinguished for his ability to combine legal theory and practice, offering interpretations that contributed to the development of legal science. He taught law in Siena in 1338 (Moriani 1873).

Pietro Andrea Mattioli (Siena 1501 – Trento 1578) was a renowned Italian physician and botanist of the Renaissance. Born in Siena, he studied medicine in Padua, distinguishing himself through his research in pharmacology and botany. He is best known for his *Commentarii in libros de materia medica* (1565), an extensive work annotating the texts of Pedanius Dioscorides, a famous Greek physician and botanist from the 1st century. This work became one of the main reference sources for botanical and pharmaceutical knowledge of the time. Mattioli’s work played a crucial role in spreading knowledge about medicinal plants and shaping medical practices during the Renaissance. In 1523, he was appointed as a lecturer at the University of Siena (Moriani 1873).

8 RELATED SCHOLARS

Felice Peretti (Grottammare 1521 – Roma 1590), known as Pope Sixtus V, was born to a humble family. He joined the Franciscan order at a young age and distinguished himself for his theological knowledge. After completing his studies in Fermo, he was appointed to teach theology in Siena at the Franciscan convent. From 1562 to 1564, he taught at the University of Rome (Herbermann 1913). He ascended to the papal throne in 1585. During his brief but energetic papacy, he reformed the Roman Curia, strengthened the Church’s finances, and promoted major public works in Rome, such as the reconstruction of the Acqua Felice aqueduct. His moral rigor and administrative reforms made him a prominent figure in the Counter-Reformation.

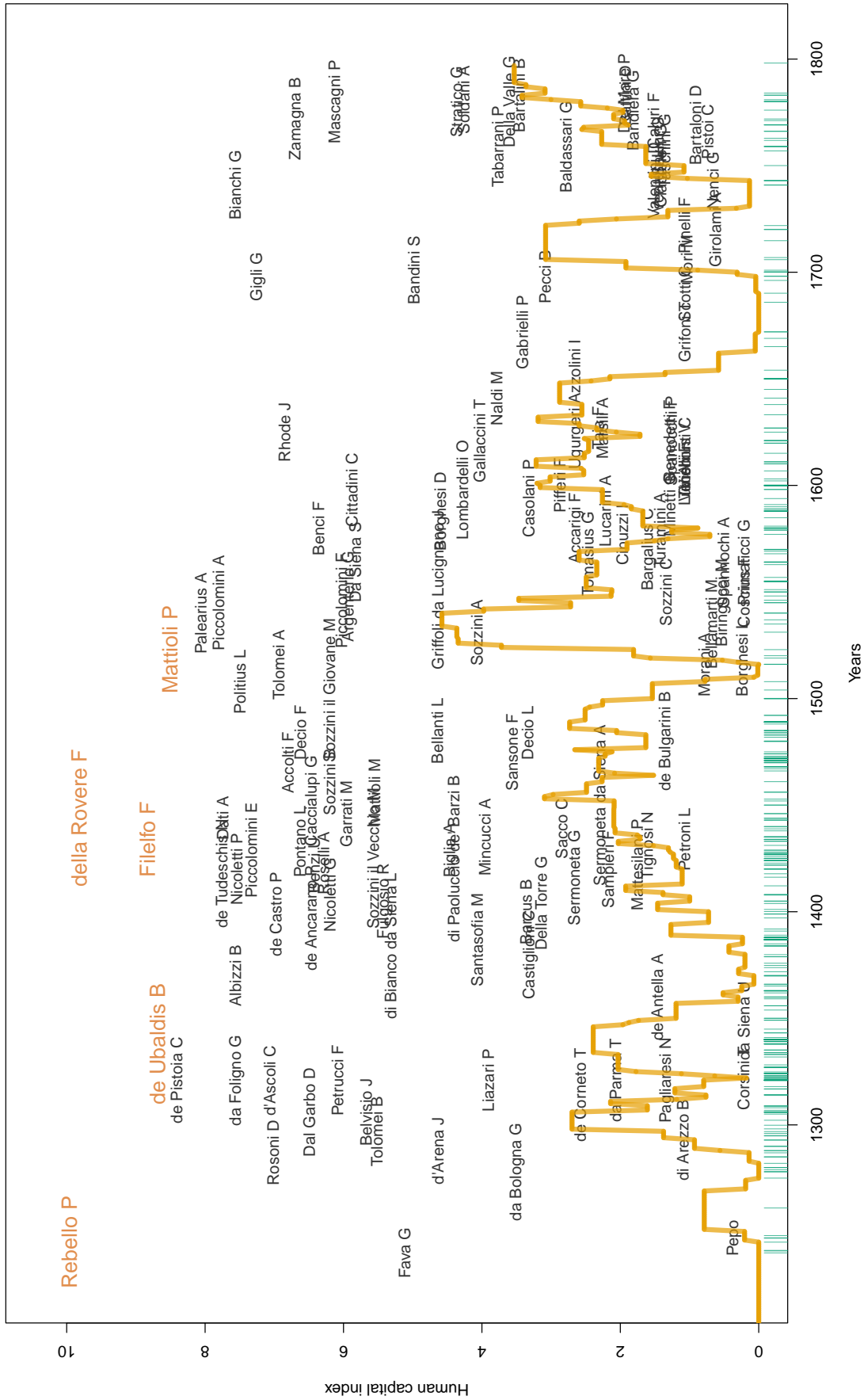


Figure 4: Famous scholars and university notability (orange)

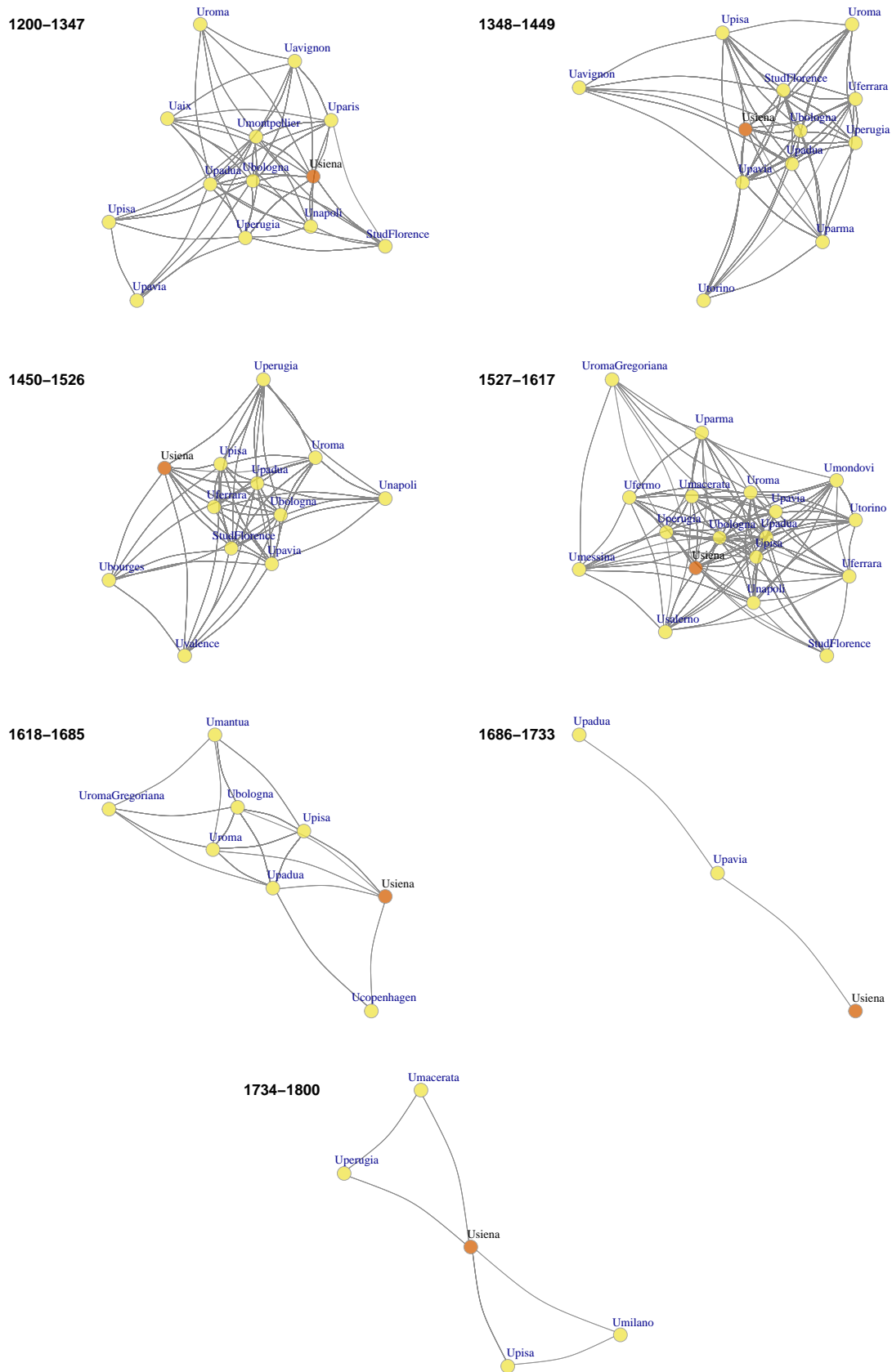


Figure 5: Links between Siena and other universities through scholars' mobility by period

9 UNIVERSITY NETWORK

Our assumption is that a professors' involvement in multiple universities throughout their career establishes a linkage between those institutions. We present those universities that were connected to the University of Siena during each period in Figure 5. From its inception through the 16th century, some scholars entertained multiple affiliations with other institutions of the Italian Peninsula. The connection with Bologna and Paris is evidence of its interconnectedness with the top institutions of the time. Before 1600, Siena enjoyed remarkable linkages with the French universities of Paris, Montpellier, Aix-en-Provence, etc. Alongside the above mentioned decay in the degree of internationalization that followed the 17th century, we observe a gradual decrease in the number of interuniversity connections that the *Studium* managed to entertain.

10 WHO'S WHO ON THE MOON

Another way to measure the notability of individuals is to look for signs of recognition such as street names, names of schools, research institutes, prizes, and lunar crater names. Two craters are named after the scholars Alessandro Piccolomini (1508–1578) and Francesco degli Stabili known as Cecco d'Ascoli (1269–1327). The former was a humanist and Catholic archbishop and he taught in 1545 (Moriani 1873). The latter was as physician and poet, teaching medicine in Siena in 1321 (Frova, Catoni, and Renzi 2001).

11 FINAL THOUGHTS

The history of the University of Siena resembles that of other medieval universities in Central Italy. Throughout its history, it certainly enjoyed local prestige, however its relevance at the Italian level declined after 1500. The reasons for Siena's consequent marginalization in the European intellectual scene could be manifold. First and foremost, geographical factors might have played a role. Universities like Siena, Perugia and Arezzo, might have benefitted from a first-mover advantage in the aftermath of their creation, to be then overtaken by cities like Pisa (Gualandris and Vitale 2023), whose foundation took place with one century of delay. Moreover, the Republic of Pisa was bigger in size and with access to the sea. Siena's capacity to attract and produce human capital cannot be compared to that of other big European universities.

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Homepage: <https://perso.uclouvain.be/david.delacroix/uthc.html>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/UTHCerc>

Database: <https://shiny-lidam.sipr.ucl.ac.be/scholars/>

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